

Folk

furniture

radicalism



In a world that so often flattens the past, **SUZANNE DEMISCH** stands as a steward of layered memory – a collector, gallerist, and restless seeker who sees design as living history. In conversation with photographer **WILLIAM JESS LAIRD**, she traces the threads of her upbringing among New England antiques, her serendipitous partnership with Stéphane Danant, and a lifetime devoted to celebrating overlooked voices, from Maria Pergay to Sheila Hicks. As she moves between folk furniture and postwar French radicalism, between her own preserved apartment walls and the pulse of the gallery, Demisch’s story reveals an enduring fascination with the imperfect, the inherited, and the yet-to-be-discovered – a reminder that the spaces we inhabit are as complex and curious as we dare to let them be.

**WJL**

Can you tell me about the home you grew up in? I’m curious if there are any influences you can trace back to that space.

**SD**

I grew up in Bloomfield, Connecticut – a quintessential New England environment. Growing up, I visited many museums, historical homes, yard sales, and antique fairs. My Dad’s house was in New Hampshire. As a teenager, I went on a stretch on Route 4, between Lee and Chichester, known as Antique Alley. My Dad also owned the Colonial Inn in Concord, Massachusetts. That building is special: originally three separate structures that were joined together in 1897. The central portion, which is today’s main inn, was used as an ammunition store during the American Revolution. That’s where I became interested in folk and historical works.

After graduating, I worked at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution (WHOI) in the Marine Policy Center in Cape Cod, where I was involved in research. I started dealing in antiques as a hobby. Later, I moved to New York City. In 1993, I earned a Master of Fine Arts from NYSID, focusing on Folk Furniture. In 1995, I established myself as a professional dealer, and by 1996 I

was on Industrial Home’s website alongside 10 design dealers globally!

Through my education and my first professional experiences, I developed a passion and curiosity for research. This is what drives my collections – both personally and with the gallery. I love learning, exploring and finding a particular work. There are a lot of layers to this process because I’m still captivated by my initial interests early in life (Americana, for example) as much as I am by my more recent affinities. To me, the most exciting part of collecting is that it can take years of discovery, anticipation, and commitment to finally find what you’re looking for. Since 2017, I have been researching the more architectural side of Sheila Hicks’ practice.

**WJL**

Were your parents interested in design?

**SD**

[laughs] No.

**WJL**

Was there anything you collected as a kid?

**SD**

I began collecting 18th-Century Americana furniture as a teenager. I was drawn to the craftsmanship, the materials,

and the historical depth each piece carried. I was especially taken by American furniture from the 1730s to the 1790s – pieces in the Queen Anne and Chippendale styles – which blend Baroque, classical, and Asian influences.

**WJL**

I read that you met your partner, Stéphane Danant, in the gallery by chance at a Paris flea market. What sparked a conversation between the two of you? What were you looking at?

**SD**

When I met Stéphane in 1999 at a Paris Flea market, we were both dealers eager to travel Europe and source new works and pieces. It was during this time that we recognised a void in the representation of French postwar design in the United States. That was the beginning of our partnership, and in 2005 we opened our first gallery in Chelsea.

**WJL**

You two created a gallery with such a tight focus on postwar French design. Can you reflect on how the reputation of this period of design has changed in the past two decades since the gallery’s inception? Are there particular designers whose reputation has shifted in an unexpected way?



**SD**

I believe our work helped draw attention to the practices of designers like Jacques Dumond, Joseph-André Motte, Pierre Paulin and René-Jean Caillette, and place them in a broader, international design landscape. We've also been committed to showing the work of women – Maria Pergay, Sheila Hicks, Claude de Muzac, Janine Abraham, and Jacqueline Lecoq. Their contributions were overshadowed for a long time by male dominance in the industry. Through consistent focus, we've helped expand the recognition of their legacies. We're currently working with Sheila on an upcoming exhibition that will take place this fall.

**WJL**

You had a very special relationship with Maria Pergay. Can you talk about how you met and how you came to represent her work?

**SD**

Stéphane and I first came across Maria Pergay's work at a flea market. We knew we had discovered something special, but we weren't quite sure what it was yet. Vintage copies of French magazines like *Maison et Jardin* and *L'OEIL* were instrumental in our research. We'd use old images and texts to piece together her body of work while exploring flea markets in Paris.

After three years of collecting and researching, I finally met her. A friend helped – she called every person in the Yellow Pages – and eventually reached a relative who put us in contact.

We met Maria in Paris, at a bar in Montparnasse. At the end of that meeting, she invited us to visit her home in Essaouira, Morocco. Within three weeks, I went and stayed for 10 days. I will never forget that trip.

**WJL**

You were a real partner in helping her realise her later works. Can you talk about this shift in her output? How would you characterise the early work from the late?

**SD**

Maria had stopped producing works in the 1990s, but she quickly expressed her desire to produce new pieces. It's hard to differentiate the early works from the later ones, and we tend to show them together simply because Maria saw every work as part of a larger, ongoing conversation.

This is largely what drew me into her world. Maria worked in broad strokes and physical ideas; she didn't obsess over detail. She pioneered stainless steel in furniture, and she never stopped pushing its possibilities. She introduced and re-introduced themes and motifs – not with a sense of repetition – but rather as though they were part of her creative process, still in development. It was an honour to work with her and to call her a friend. Her work should absolutely be recognised alongside great women designers like Charlotte Perriand and Eileen Gray, and that has been part of our mission with the gallery for the past two decades.

**WJL**

I have always loved your apartment. Part of it used to be the legendary photographer Saul Leiter's studio. I think the extent to which you've preserved the space is remarkable. Can you talk about how you combined the spaces?

**SD**

When I went to look for an apartment in 2000, a studio was available on that block, and I bought it. In 2003, I bought the apartment next door. I eventually renovated both in 2006. The unit next to mine was Saul Lester's, and two years after he passed away in 2013, I bought and renovated that one too.

**WJL**

Why was this level of preservation so important to you?

**SD**

I knew I didn't want to change the architecture and historical character of the space, but I wanted to find a way to blend it with my personal collection. I have always been interested in how the past and present can coexist – how space can hold memory. These layers, the dialogue between different styles and perspectives, explain a life. After I bought Saul's apartment, I spent two years thinking about conservation. Some of the plaster was cracked – it was a three-coat plaster from around 1857 – but I preserved it where I could. The doors, the frames, the closets. I had them gently cleaned.

My friend, François Halard, came and photographed the apartment before I started the renovations. I want to compile an archive of Saul Leiter's work studio. That eventually became a book.

**WJL**

What was your relationship with

Saul like?

**SD**

Saul and I were friendly neighbours. We would chat about his work and about our apartments.

**WJL**

I love the unexpected combination of objects in your space. How do you think about constructing a room?

**SD**

A home should be reflective of the people who live in it, their history, their lifestyle but also their imperfections and mistakes. It's this unique and layered richness that gives it its charm.

**WJL**

Are things changing all the time?

**SD**

Often, I will move objects around and add more layers. Sometimes I change the furniture in the front room, near the kitchen, but the overall look and feel of the apartment remains the same.

**WJL**

Do you think of your home as a site for experimentation?

**SD**

Yes, I really learned to just trust my intuition. I pay little attention to the actual value of a piece and instead focus on my own eye and taste.

**WJL**

Years ago, you were diagnosed with PPA (Primary Progressive Aphasia). It's remarkable how you've been able to overcome this challenge and continue forward in your work. Can you tell me about how this has shifted your perspective? I've always been so impressed at how you're able to express yourself purely visually. Are there new strategies you employ to communicate on a more visual level?

**SD**

I first started noticing symptoms in 2013, and in 2019, I was diagnosed. It has been a challenging and interesting path since then.

While it's becoming gradually harder to explain what I think and feel, I've learned to become a visual thinker. I use material samples, photos, and drawings to communicate.

Even though my speech has diminished, my knowledge and understanding have not been affected. I have learned to trust my intuition and visual design. **RII**









